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ABSTRACT

The network of 10 Regional Educational Laboratories is funded by the United States Department of Education to serve particular geographic regions of the country and its territories and to conduct research and development in partnership with state and local educators. The Labs' central focus is on linking the knowledge from both research and practice to solve the most pressing educational problems within their regions. Following an overview of the Laboratories' background and objectives, this document presents a compilation of stories that illustrate the work of the Regional Education Laboratories. The document offers profiles of various programs and their accomplishments in four high-priority areas: school reform and improvement, professional development for educators, linkages with homes and communities, and assistance to policymakers. A list of and maps of the Regional Laboratories are included. (LMI)

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From Promise to Practice

Stories From the Regional Educational Laboratories

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An Invitation from OERI and the Regional Educational Laboratories

The past decade has seen an unprecedented interest in education and education reform. Public, private, and alternative schools have struggled to defy the "rising tide of mediocrity," to address the National Education Goals, and to meet 21st-century demands that all students achieve at high standards. The network of ten Regional Educational Laboratories is a unique resource in this nationwide effort to improve teaching and learning.

Funded by the U.S. Department of Education to serve particular geographic regions of the United States and its territories, the laboratories carry out research and development—designed in partnership with state and local educators—that seek solutions to the most persistent education problems within their regions. Laboratories are staffed with skilled professionals who can design and implement high-quality research, development, and evaluation programs, but who also have considerable pragmatic knowledge about the real world of schools. Over the next five years, two priorities will guide the laboratory program: understanding how to put together various school improvement efforts into a comprehensive and effective reform program, and understanding how successful school reform efforts can be implemented in new sites.

If you are an educator, policymaker, parent or community member who is interested or currently involved in school improvement efforts, we would like to invite you to consider your regional educational laboratory as a potential partner in your work. Laboratories are eager to learn about the educational reform initiatives underway in their region and are willing to provide well-tested, research-based information and assistance that can guide your efforts. **Your regional laboratory can help you:**

Implement research-based reforms and improvements in your school or district. Regional laboratories

- help educators draw from research on proven practices to craft reforms suited to local needs;

- provide training to teachers, administrators, and others to prepare them to carry out school reforms and improvements to teaching and learning; and

- provide continuing guidance through the hard work of implementation.

Exchange ideas with others who face challenges similar to yours. Regional laboratories

- convene and connect practitioners from their regions in discussion groups, workshops, and networks to share and solve mutual problems;

- bring to the table research-based knowledge to inform discussions and decision making; and

- span turf boundaries or organizational barriers and help build consensus.

Obtain research-based information to answer questions and help you make policy decisions. Regional laboratories

- synthesize research about significant problems and policy issues, and provide policymakers with unbiased information and analyses of options;

- provide educators in their regions with access to print and electronic data libraries, curricular materials, and other relevant products;

- offer workshops, on-line conferences, and other events to present information to educators and policymakers; and

- make referrals to other research institutions and technical assistance providers in cases where they can better meet specific needs or answer questions.

Contribute your practical wisdom to developing new knowledge. Regional laboratories

- seek input from practicing educators about key ways research and development can help them improve schools;

- work with teachers, administrators, and others on the front lines of education to design and carry out field-based research and development projects in schools and districts;

- adjust their models and strategies based on advice from practitioners about what works and what doesn't work in real classrooms; and

- collaborate with educators and policymakers to develop new materials, strategies and programs that can be shared with others.

To ask about available services or about becoming involved in laboratory activities, contact the regional educational laboratory that serves your state. A list of the laboratories and their service regions is included in this document. For more information about the laboratories—and for some examples of how their efforts can help to improve teaching and learning—please read on!

Sharon P. Robinson
Assistant Secretary
Office of Educational Research and Improvement

Acknowledgments

Educators throughout the country have struggled over the past decade to improve the schools in which they work. While these efforts sometimes are guided by good research and experience, too often they are not. We envision this publication, which tells a series of stories about how schools and communities have been assisted in their improvement efforts, as a way to link educators involved in school reform efforts with the Regional Educational Laboratories.

The ability to tell these varied and far-reaching stories of the Regional Educational Laboratories has been enhanced by the efforts of many individuals. In particular, the publication would not have been possible without the initial efforts of staff members from each of the 10 Regional Educational Laboratories, who closely examined their work and provided significant and compelling stories about the varied efforts and accomplishments of the Laboratories over the past five years. Those contributing from the Laboratories include: Soleil Gregg, Pam Lutz, Pat Penn, and Topper Sherwood (Appalachia Educational Laboratory); Nikki Filby and Jim Johnson (Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development); Sandra Berger (Mid-continent Regional Educational Laboratory); John Blaser, Stephanie Blaser, and Lenaya Raack (North Central Regional Educational Laboratory); Rex Hagans (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory); Kathy Busick, Alice Kawakami, Stan Koki, Paul Piper, and Fata Simanu-Klutz (Pacific Region Educational Laboratory); Janet Angelis, Paula Preller, and Melissa Solomon (Regional Laboratory for Educational Improvement of the Northeast and Islands); John A. Connolly, Richard Grove, and Barbara Smey-Richman (Research for Better Schools); Gina Burkhardt, Paula Egelson, Nancy Livesay, and Wendy McColskey (Southeastern Regional Vision for Education); and Lori Foradory, Mimi Mayer, Kathleen McGree, Joyce Pollard and Kris Taylor (Southwest Educational Development Laboratory).

Nancy Kober took the many stories provided her and used her skills as a writer to weave them together into a rich and multi-colored fabric that fully represented the unique contributions of each Laboratory as well as the program as a whole. Bob LeGrand and Donna DiToto, of the Media and Information Services staff in OERI, contributed significantly to the look and readability of the document.

We sincerely hope that this publication can make the capabilities, expertise and acquired knowledge of the Laboratories more widely available to the teachers, administrators, parents, policymakers, and community members committed to ensuring that all children can learn to the fullest of their potential.

Robert M. Stonehill
Thelma K. Leenhouts
Carol N. Chelemer

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Overview of the Regional Educational Laboratories

For 30 years, the federally funded Regional Educational Laboratories have played an important role in educational research and development in the United States. While the number of Laboratories and their regional configurations have changed over the years, their central focus has remained much the same: linking the knowledge from both research and practice to solve the most pressing educational problems within their regions.

The Regional Educational Laboratories at a Glance

History:	Laboratories were created by Congress through the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 to bring structure and cohesion to a fragmented federal role in educational research and development.
Federal law:	Laboratories were reauthorized on March 31, 1994, in Public Law 103–227. The law spells out the Laboratories' responsibilities, governance, regions, funds apportionment, and activities.
Funding:	In fiscal year 1995, the Laboratories received an appropriation of $41 million. Laboratories also received additional funds under other grants and contracts from the Department of Education, other federal agencies, and state and local sources.
Clients:	Teachers, administrators, other educators, school board members, students, families, members of the community, social service workers, state education officials, legislators, researchers, and others involved in educational improvement, policy development or applied research.
Numbers served:	In 1995, the Laboratories had over 3 million contacts with clients, including telephone and mail inquiries, visits and direct contacts, field-based services, publications requested or sold, and log-ons to Laboratory on-line services. Excluding publications and electronic log-ons, Laboratory staff responded to over 250,000 service and information requests.
Studies:	In 1995, the Laboratories were involved in 1,400 research and evaluation studies and syntheses.

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Currently, 10 Laboratories are supported by the U.S. Department of Education through its Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI).[1] The Laboratories are staffed with skilled professionals who can apply research and development techniques and also bring to bear considerable experience about real school situations.The Laboratories have six defining features:

Regional Focus

One defining feature of the Laboratories is their **strong regional focus**. Each Laboratory has its own agenda of work that reflects the most compelling problems of educators and policymakers across its region. The agenda is determined by a governing board that represents a cross-section of regional educational interests and includes members from every state in its geographic area. Laboratories use multiple techniques, such as focus groups, surveys, and advisory committees to assess regional needs.

Even where there are common goals across the entire Laboratory network—to improve rural education, for example—the work of the Laboratories still has a strong regional flavor. Project STICKS, a technology-based instructional program developed by Research for Better Schools and other partners, prepares youths in rural Pennsylvania for high-tech workplaces, and it differs noticeably in strategies and target population from the efforts of the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory to promote technology-based instruction in rural districts.

As a result of their regional priorities and particular combinations of staff expertise, the Laboratories have somewhat different strengths. The Mid-continent Regional Educational Laboratory, for instance, is a leader in translating findings from cognitive science into "learner-centered" principles—guidelines for school reform based on research about how people learn. The North Central Regional Educational Laboratory is winning awards for its live interactive educational video series on such topics as school restructuring and teachers who use research to improve student achievement.

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[1]In December 1995, ten new contracts were competitively awarded to operate the laboratories through the year 2000. As a result of the competition, two of the laboratories whose work is reported on in this document—Research for Better Schools (RBS) and the Regional Laboratory for Educational Improvement of the Northeast and Islands (NE/I)—were replaced by new contractors. Information on all current laboratories is provided at the end of this chapter. RBS can be contacted by telephone on 215–574–9300. NE/I can be contacted by telephone on 508-470-0098.

Close Relationships

A second distinctive feature of the Regional Educational Laboratories is their **close relationship with practicing educators**. Decisions about research and development activities draw heavily from recommendations of teachers, administrators, parents, policymakers, and others on the front lines of education. These key people also have input into all other aspects of Laboratory work, from the initial design of projects to the final publication of materials and products. Teachers, for example, help develop, test, and refine Laboratory-developed models in their classrooms. Administrators identify urgent problems in their districts and work with Laboratories to carry out reforms.

In short, the relationship between the Laboratories and practitioners is one of mutual benefit. At the same time the Laboratories are assisting educators, they are also learning from them about what works in the field and what does not work. And even as educators are advising the Laboratories, they are learning how to apply research-based knowledge to their classrooms and schools.

Laboratories obtain practitioner input from various formal and informal sources, in addition to their governing boards. The SouthEastern Regional Vision for Education, for instance, sponsors a committee of current and past Teachers of the Year from each state in the region; these teachers counsel the Laboratory on programs and policies, exchange views, and exert leadership in their states. In the region of the Appalachia Educational Laboratory, teachers meet in study groups to review research and practice on timely educational topics and develop projects in partnership with Laboratory staff.

Practitioners also interact with Laboratories and with each other through the use of technology. Each Laboratory has a node directly connected to the Internet, and several Laboratories operate electronic libraries of research information that can be accessed by educators with a computer and modem. To connect far-flung schools in a region that spans six time zones and the International Date Line, the Pacific Region Educational Laboratory has established computer-based local area networks in many of Pacific island school districts, along with wide area connections to its Internet server in Hawaii.

Practical Orientation

This two-way relationship with practitioners contributes to a third unique feature of the Regional Laboratories: **their practical orientation.** The Laboratories work with educators to develop strategies for solving the sometimes messy problems that educators face in actual classrooms and schools. Unlike university-based research centers that tend to tackle long-term, complex research problems, the Regional Educational Laboratories are capable of moving fast to respond to time-sensitive situations and policy issues.

This is not to suggest that the Laboratories are a local "911 number." Because they do not have resources to address every state and local need, Laboratories work with their Boards, choose their projects systematically and carefully, taking into account their regional significance and the willingness of school partners to assume the responsibilities of field-based research and development. If a school's unique concerns do not fit into the Laboratory's priorities, then the Laboratory can make referrals to other appropriate technical assistance services.

Independence

A fourth key feature of the Regional Laboratories is their **independence and objectivity**. Their information and assistance are valued for their neutrality and credibility.

Nationwide Needs

Working together as a national network, the Laboratories have a fifth asset, the **capacity to tackle nationwide needs and encourage efficiency.** In recent years, Congress and OERI have set certain national priorities for the Laboratories, including meeting the needs of rural schools, improving education for children at risk of low performance, and enhancing mathematics and science education. And in 1992, all 10 Laboratories established the Laboratory Network Program (LNP), which pools their expertise to confront tough problems, shares the "best of the best" of Laboratory programs and activities, and maximizes resources systemwide. Recent LNP task forces coordinated inter-Laboratory projects in such areas as improving education of Native Americans, analyzing alternative forms of assessment, and building a Laboratory- based telecommunications system.

Although not all Laboratory services are free of charge, Laboratories can help schools and districts save costs down the road. By using proven practices and applying Laboratory expertise, educators and policymakers can avoid duplications, mistakes, and unnecessary costs of reinventing programs. And certain Laboratory programs and products are available at low cost or no cost to clients in a Laboratory's own region. The Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, for example, operates a library of assessment tools that schools in the region can borrow and try out free of charge; last year the center circulated over 2,500 assessment instruments.

Laboratories also leverage resources from other sources, such as corporations and foundations, and promote economies of scale. Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development[2] matches its entire budget of federal funds with substantial commitments from state, local, private-sector, and foundation sources. The Regional Laboratory for Educational Improvement of the Northeast and Islands helped reduce costs across its region by arranging for several states to jointly hire a top-notch technology consulting group to assist them in developing technology plans.

Federal Commitment

Sustained federal commitment is a final feature that has been crucial to the Regional Laboratory network. Much of what we know about improving schools has resulted from the federal investment in the Laboratories. Many instructional strategies—that were once on the cutting edge and are now common practice in many schools—emerged from the Regional Laboratories. No other set of institutions has generated as useful a body of processes and ideas for making schools better than the Regional Laboratories.

[2]Under the contract awards for 1995—2000, the Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development united with the Southwest Regional Laboratory to become WestEd.

The Regional Educational Laboratories—A Portfolio

During the past five years, the federal investment in Regional laboratories has yielded many remarkable outcomes. Some of the most significant are processes rather than products—models, ideas, and strategies for improving education in schools, districts, or states. Other fruits of the Regional Laboratory program are more tangible, such as books, reports, instructional materials, videos, and software products. Laboratories disseminate their findings regionally and nationally through publications, newsletters, the Internet, video and audio formats, meetings and workshops, and word of mouth from satisfied customers.

This document pulls together stories that illustrate the work of the Regional Educational Laboratories. They give a flavor of the variety, inventiveness, and value of the hundreds of programs and processes that have emerged from the Regional Educational Laboratories and provide background for the readers to use in deciding whether or not to take advantage of what the Laboratories have to offer. Discussions of Laboratory work in four high-priority areas—school reform and improvement, professional development for educators, linkages with homes and communities, and assistance to policymakers—are but a small sampling of Laboratory accomplishments. While these are not the only areas addressed by the Laboratories, they are among the most timely. It should be noted that the work of the Regional Labs does not always fall into neat categories. Some activities touch on multiple purposes; a project to improve reading instruction, for example, might use professional development as its main strategy, or a program to enhance school-community collaborations might also produce information useful to policymakers.

Laboratories Promote School Reform and Improvement

Fostering school reform and improvement is an essential purpose of nearly all Laboratory activities, with boosting student performance the bottom-line goal. Working together with educators in their geographic areas, the Regional Educational Laboratories identify and assess the greatest reform needs in their regions and craft a variety of activities to promote educational improvement and reform.

New methods of instruction in specific subjects or knowledge domains are one area of Laboratory work. Mathematics and science are common topics, as are reading, writing, and integrated curricula combining content from several disciplines *(see Reading, the Gateway to All Learning)*. Efforts to enhance students' critical thinking and reasoning skills can also demonstrate innovative and effective teaching strategies.

The Appalachia Educational Laboratory has devised a program called QUILT—Questioning and Understanding to Improve Learning and Thinking—that trains teachers to use well-placed questions to stimulate students to think, question, and learn. Work on QUILT started in 1987 in response to teacher requests for a workshop on classroom questioning techniques. The Lab complied, but concerns about the effectiveness of different training designs transformed the workshop into a test of different professional development models. A modern-day take on the Socratic method, the program was pilot-tested in five Kentucky School districts. Data from field testing revealed that the most intensive training model—a yearlong, school-based program that includes training, modeling, practice, discussion and feedback from peers—was considerably more effective than other models in changing teacher behavior.

QUILT uses a cost-effective train-the-trainers approach: Lab staff instruct cadres of local teachers in the QUILT model, who then train their peers. To date, there are nearly 300 trainers, who in turn have presented QUILT materials to 4,000 teachers. In the classroom of one QUILT-trained teacher at Moss Elementary in Nashville, Tennessee, kindergartners take turns asking and answering questions about stories they've just read. According to Moss principal Martha Butler, QUILT helps teachers, especially new ones, learn "what good teaching looks like."

Data from a four-state field test indicated that QUILT-trained teachers were employing what they'd learned to change classroom practice and that students in QUILT classrooms were asking more questions that reflected better thinking. QUILT is one of several Lab programs being disseminated throughout the nation by the U.S. Department of Education's National Diffusion Network.

Laboratories are also helping teachers understand and apply performance-based assessment and other alternative forms of gauging student learning.

In 1993, a team of teachers in Wichita Falls, Texas, approached the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory to help them learn more about alternative assessment, so that they could revise the district's science assessments to fit better with a hands-on approach to instruction. With funding and technical assistance from the Laboratory, the team studied the research on alternative assessments, examined performance-based assessment tasks from other states, and tried out some tasks with their students.

Eventually the teachers developed their own assessment task, called "Sorting Fish," based on an actual field experience in which fifth-graders from their school helped the city Parks and Wildlife Department classify live fish taken from a drained pond. As the students looked for the distinguishing features of sunfish, catfish, bass, crappie, shad, carp, and drum, they learned about scientific classification methods. The assessment task pictures four different kinds of fish. Students are asked to name each type of fish, describe in writing how they reached their conclusions, and compare the key characteristics of the different varieties.

The Lab has incorporated this task into an assessment "toolkit" that its staff use to train other teachers to implement alternative assessments. Trainers give teachers the Sorting Fish task, along with a dozen examples of student responses, and ask them to categorize the student papers by quality. Teachers learn how to develop and apply scoring criteria and judge how much students have learned.

Laboratories are also helping teachers and schools apply technology to the school improvement process. Projects are underway to demonstrate effective integration of various technologies into teaching and learning and provide advice to educators about choosing the right technology. Laboratory technology efforts have also greatly expanded access to research-based information on school reform.

Pathways to School Improvement, an Internet "navigating" tool introduced by the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, is helping educators access reliable and valuable information tailored to their school improvement needs. Pathways organizes research-based information and education resources from across the Internet in a succinct and friendly format. Pathways authors and researchers, who are experts in a range of educational fields, work closely with classroom teachers and state education agency staff to ensure that Pathways topics respond to critical needs of practitioners. Only resources that pass a strict quality review are incorporated.

Pathways quickly leads users to the information they need—in hypertext files, graphics, videoclips, audio comments, and databases—and allows them to explore in depth or just read a summary. In the space of a one-hour preparation period, a math teacher can find the latest research on proven practices, download lesson plans and hands-on learning activities, and share them with colleagues. Any school with a connection to the Internet's World Wide Web can access Pathways. (The Lab's web site is at http://www.ncrel.org/ncrel/.) As Dan Holden, a curriculum specialist from Ohio, commented about Pathways, "You have sifted the wheat from the chaff and have organized the material in a concise and useful format."

Currently Pathways is being accessed about 3,000 times per month. Eventually it will include hypertext files on over 100 critical topics in school reform; a self-diagnostic tool to help school districts assess their greatest improvement needs; and information about where users can go in their local area to get additional help on specific issues.

Recognizing that students have diverse learning needs, the Regional Laboratories have mounted projects to improve education for particular groups of students, including children in urban schools and rural schools, students at risk of school failure, children with limited English proficiency, children with disabilities, and culturally diverse groups of students.

The South West Regional Laboratory, a southern California branch of WestEd, is bringing the Success for All program into 17 linguistically diverse schools in California and Arizona. A renowned program originally developed at Johns Hopkins University through an OERI research center award, Success for All uses oral language activities, one-on-one tutoring, frequent assessments, a full-time teacher-facilitator, and other components to ensure that all children in high-poverty schools master reading.

The Lab adopted the program for Spanish-speaking students in its region and aids the schools with planning, budgeting, training, coaching, and other supports. The first round of reading test scores from the project schools are highly encouraging: after two years, students in the lowest quartile of achievement gained seven months over comparison students.

Two important goals of Laboratory reform efforts are to generate school improvements that can be sustained over the long term and to produce strategies that can be transferred or adapted to a wide variety of sites. Often Laboratories will test an approach in a few schools or districts, obtaining important feedback from practicing educators, modifying the projects, and producing lessons and new knowledge that will help other districts interested in similar reforms. Once the pilot is completed, Laboratory staff often launch wider-scale training activities to introduce the program or process to educators across their region. Some Laboratory projects are yielding valuable information about what it takes to "scale up" expand reforms that succeeded in one school or district into more diverse and numerous settings.

Another notable group of Laboratory programs addresses "systemic" reform—comprehensive, coherent improvement goals for an entire school or district. Laboratories are working with schools and districts to develop research-based strategies to plan systemic reform, catalyze people to change, and build local capacity to carry out planned improvements *(see Onward and Upward)*. Other Laboratory work deals with the growing movement to tie school reform to high standards for student learning *(see Tracking the Standards Movement)*.

Laboratories use various strategies to promote school improvement and reforms. Developing and implementing field-based research and demonstration projects in partnership with schools or districts is one such strategy. Training teachers, administrators, or other key people who can make or break education reform is another common strategy. Laboratories also provide educators with research-based information on effective practices, advise them about which reforms work best in which settings, organize networks of like-minded reformers, and conduct evaluations of the effectiveness of particular school reform and improvement efforts. Many projects also produce innovative curricula, instructional materials, new forms of assessment, teacher training materials, and other tools.

🕮Reading, the Gateway to All Learning🕮

Buddy reading time at Dana Elementary School in Columbus, Ohio. Fifth-graders and first–graders pair off and find comfortable spots in the classroom, the younger children clutching colorful books, the older ones holding survey forms. A buzz permeates the room as the older children ask the younger ones to guess what will happen in the story they are about to read. This survey is much more than a fill-in-the-blanks worksheet. It asks the children to think as they read, and it is one of several tools teachers use for the school's Strategic Teaching and Reading Project (referred to as Strategic Reading).

Developed by the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory and other partners, Strategic Reading is an innovative approach that uses reading to improve instruction across the curriculum in grades K–12. Among its features are team teaching, active roles for students, meaningful principal participation, a literature-based reading program, and a five-step staff development model.

The program began in Wisconsin in 1987 after reading scores plummeted in rural areas. The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, the Wisconsin Educational Communications Board, and the Lab came together to construct a carefully monitored experiment in 17 rural Wisconsin schools that would use current research on reading to improve instruction in this vital subject. As the program progressed, teachers discovered that the strategies they were piloting also worked well in other subjects.

Since 1991, the program has been introduced in 91 urban and rural schools across seven states. In Detroit alone, it has affected more than 1,100 teachers and nearly 100,000 students. Lab consultants train school teams over multiple sessions, using a professional development model that encourages teachers to expand their knowledge base, observe different models, reflect on their actions, change their practices, and gain expertise. The Lab also provides ongoing support to teachers through newsletters, audio conferences, and field visits.

In a 1993 evaluation, 40 percent of program students performed at proficient or advanced levels on authentic assessments of reading comprehension, compared with just 14 percent of non-STRP students. The majority of schools that joined the project in 1993 reported higher than average gains in state reading test scores. As one Ohio teacher remarked, "I was ready for something refreshing that had meaning and purpose behind it. My students thought class was fun, and I saw results in the students' work and knowledge."

🕮Onward and Upward🕮

On the surface, a remote Alaskan village, a Florida tourist mecca, and a Mississippi lumber town appear to share few educational needs. But schools in all three communities are using a process called Onward to Excellence to boost student performance. This is both a practical school improvement process and a training program that teaches educators how to use research on school effectiveness to set and achieve their own school reform goals.

The program was developed more than ten years ago by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, after release of the report, *A Nation at Risk*, incited momentum for school reform. Regional needs assessment data revealed that while schools and districts in the Northwest were talking about school reform, many lacked a structured approach for making it happen. Onward to Excellence sought to provide that structure.

Today Lab professionals train school teams in a series of intensive workshops spread out over two years. Teams learn how to lead their entire school staffs through a 10-step process that includes studying research on effective schools, collecting data on current student performance, establishing schoolwide improvement goals based on that data, writing and implementing a plan for change, and monitoring progress toward their chosen goals. This improvement process also encourages schools to engage parents, businesses, and community members in school reform.

Onward to Excellence is flexible enough to be adapted to local conditions; each school chooses its own goals and strategies and works at its own pace. The Lab provides the research base, training, materials, and technical assistance. To date, some 2,000 schools from coast to coast have undergone training. In some of these sites, dramatic changes are occurring.

In the 370-student Yupiit School District in Akiachak, Alaska, townspeople and educators designed goals for their children's education that blended traditional Yup'ik values and subsistence skills, such as Eskimo dollmaking and snowmobile engine repair, with instruction in academic subjects and advanced technologies. "I really believe that we have had meaningful community input about what goes on in our schools," said superintendent Reid Straabe. "They tell us they want children to have respect for one another and respect for adults. They tell us that attendance is important, that career exploration is important. And they want their kids to be fluent in both the Yup'ik and English languages."

The Hiland Park Elementary School in Panama City, Florida, identified math improvement as its main school goal. After just one year, math scores shot up, putting more than 80 percent of the school's students in the top two achievement quartiles. "Everybody in that school and every parent at home knew that improving math was their goal," recalled Joanne Cox, director of planning, research, and evaluations for the Bay District Schools. "That's what made the difference."

At Sale Elementary in Columbus, Mississippi, children are learning math, science, and other subjects in a pine grove "classroom" behind the school—measuring rainfall, testing pond water, and studying frogs and squirrels. The shift toward hands-on learning and small group projects that grew out of the Onward to Excellence process has paid off. Average school scores on the Stanford Achievement Test rose from 48.7 in 1991 to 54.6 in 1994.

In a 1990 national study, staff from a representative sample of participating schools reported that the process had led to several types of positive change, including stronger cooperation among school staff, increased staff involvement in school improvement, better attitudes, better communication, improved school climate, and higher school performance.

In many states, schools are using Onward to Excellence to carry out state-mandated reforms. Schools in Oregon use it to prepare students to meet new state performance standards. Schools in Florida have found that it meshes neatly with a state mandate to adopt school-level improvement plans. And in Kansas and Mississippi, schools find it helps them meet state performance-based accreditation requirements.

Onward to Excellence has attracted significant corporate and foundation funding from such entities as Weyerhaeuser International Paper, the BellSouth Foundation, the Phil Hardin Foundation in Mississippi, and the Meyer Memorial Trust in Alaska.

🕮Tracking the Standards Movement🕮

Across the country, states and national associations have buckled down to the formidable task of setting standards for what students should know and be able to do in core academic subjects. But many questions remain about what these content standards should look like and how they should be used.

Recognizing a need throughout its region for objective information about standards, the Mid-continent Regional Educational Laboratory started a project to track the work of national standards-setting groups, analyze the major issues surrounding content standards, and develop a model that school districts and states could apply to set their own standards. To date, the Laboratory has analyzed standards and benchmarks in seven subject areas—science, mathematics, history, geography, the arts, language arts, and health—with material on four more subjects due early next year.

One major product is a popular publication that summarizes current national and state efforts to develop content standards and describes the Laboratory's model. Now in its second version, The Systematic Identification and Articulation of Content Standards and Benchmarks has sold more than 5,300 copies. Some districts and schools are using the examples in this document—194 standards and 2,787 benchmarks in all—as reference

points to design their own standards. One section of the report, for example, walks readers through five questions that a school or district should address before adopting a standards-based approach to school reform. The Lab's materials on standards are accessible through the Lab's World Wide Web server (http://www.mcrel.org/).

Trainers also conduct workshops and provide technical assistance to help educators around the country develop and appropriately use standards. Three states and several school districts have asked the Laboratory to analyze their draft standards and curricular frameworks.

Laboratories Help Teachers and Administrators Grow Professionally

Improving the professional skills and knowledge of teachers and school leaders is a fundamental strategy in most Laboratory programs and the main goal of several Lab initiatives. It is educators, after all, who determine whether change will take hold in the classroom. Teachers are closely involved in designing and directing most Laboratory professional development efforts.

For the Laboratories, professional development is a two-way street. Teachers acquire new knowledge and strategies, and the Laboratories gain teacher-tested wisdom about what works in the classroom and what doesn't. And both teachers and Laboratory staff learn more about what makes a professional development process effective.

Many Laboratory professional development programs train educators to understand and apply specific reform strategies, thereby linking reform and professional development. A related group of activities focuses on preparing teachers and administrators to become agents of change in their own institutions.

Drawing from research about organizational transformation in fields as diverse as agriculture and medicine, the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory has developed Leadership for Change, a process that trains administrators and teachers to motivate positive change in their schools and districts. Participants learn how to use a six-step process that includes creating a context, articulating a vision, planning and providing resources, investing in professional development, monitoring progress, and providing continuous assistance.

The program has trained 400 educators in 15 states, who are making new ideas a reality in their home sites and sharing their knowledge with their staffs and colleagues. Training gave superintendent Roland Chevalier from St. Martin Parish, Louisiana, the tools to carry out a vision for a new early childhood curriculum. Brenda Montero, assistant principal of Lowery Middle School in Donaldson, Louisiana, worked with her staff to plan an alternative school for disruptive students. "[LFC] helped me know what to look for, how to predict what to expect from others involved in the process," Montero explained. Inspired by the process, teachers at Lowery have come up with dozens of other no-cost improvements.

Some professional development projects focus on improving instruction in particular subjects, others on cultivating special teaching methods. And several Laboratory efforts strive to build teachers' capacities to use research-based information to enhance their own teaching.

Five years ago, the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory began working with three Oregon classrooms to study effective methods of teaching writing. That initial research and demonstration identified six major traits that characterize good writing—ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, and conventions: (e.g., spelling, grammar, punctuation)—and to develop a model for training educators to teach these traits. To date, more than 70,000 teachers around the country have been trained in the model. Teachers who use it praise its practicality and its clear ties between instruction and assessment. An evaluation of the project found that students who received instruction in the model performed better on a 45-minute writing exam than they had before the instruction, and also performed better than students in a control group; the impact cut across all ethnic and socioeconomic groups.

Training teachers or administrators to become self-sufficient trainers of others is a common strategy used by the Laboratories to multiply the impact of their professional development efforts.

On the remote island of Falalop in Woleai Atoll, Yap State, the Pacific Region Educational Laboratory organized a week-long institute in 1993 that trained teachers to use the strengths of Yapese culture to improve island education and to develop appropriate methods for assessing the learning outcomes that the Yapese people desire for their children. Several local chiefs also attended the sessions, which were offered to all the island's elementary and middle school teachers.

But the Lab's purposes extended beyond Yap. The Pacific region's amazing cultural diversity, vast distances, small schools, and limited resources create daunting professional development challenges for island teachers. Through the Yap project and related efforts, the Lab is testing a model for building a corps of local trainers, who will serve as change agents in their districts and become self-sufficient trainers of others. The model involves four phases for extending the training process to more remote sites and for gradually shifting training responsibilities from the Laboratory to the local team. The original Yap trainers have conducted

professional development in the Republic of Palau, and the model has been adapted in Pohnpei, Chuuk, and the Northern Marianas. Training materials have been revised and modified frequently to suit different cultures and environments.

The Labs are creating strategies for providing professional development, expanding knowledge about how adults learn, determining which strategies work best and for whom, and figuring out how to sustain the effects of training after formal relationships end. Laboratory efforts are not limited to veteran teachers. Some projects are generating strategies for preparing new teachers *(see Teaching Cases)* or helping beginning teachers succeed in the classroom and stay in the profession *(see A Regional Approach to Professional Growth)*. Laboratories are also addressing critical issues in teacher certification and evaluation.

Teachers are not the only participants in Laboratory professional development activities. Programs exist for principals, superintendents, curriculum specialists, preschool and child care providers, school board members, and other key personnel.

Far West Laboratory (now known as WestEd) has developed a program to meet one of the nation's most urgent professional development needs—training for child care providers. Using a comprehensive set of broadcast quality videos, curriculum guides, and training manuals, the Program for Infant/Toddler Caregivers teaches caregivers how to provide nurturing and educationally stimulating environments for their young charges. The program was created after a survey of California parents and practitioners identified quality child care as a high priority need. Materials were developed over a six-year period, guided by input from review panels.

The Laboratory model offers training of different intensities; participants who complete more in-depth training can become certified trainers of other caregivers. WestEd is working with the other Regional Laboratories to disseminate the program nationwide.

California has adopted the program statewide and, in collaboration with the Lab, has trained over 8,000 caregivers. Oregon is using the program to construct a career ladder for caregivers. Certified trainers in Montana have organized a teleconferencing course for child care providers. And in Oklahoma and West Virginia, teen parenting programs have adopted the training model.

In 1991, the Mississippi legislature enacted a law requiring all new school board members to complete a course of executive training. When the state education department asked the Southeastern Regional Vision for Education to support and help develop this course, the Laboratory decided to become involved, given the broader potential benefits: the chance to develop a model that could transfer to other states and the opportunity to collect research data about the impact of training on school board members.

The Model School Board Training course was developed and refined across eight training sessions, with input from participants, presenters, state staff, and the state school boards association. The course covers issues of financial management, crisis management, personnel, instruction, and school law, and engages school board members in discussion, role playing, presentations, and small group work. In 1994 the Lab shared the program with school board associations in other Southeastern states.

Focus groups with former participants discovered several positive effects from the training, including a clearer understanding of board member roles and responsibilities, better consensus-building skills, and increased knowledge about education issues. "We're becoming more knowledgeable about what things are out there in education," said one participant. "There's a lot of creativity that came from better communications among all of us, and a sense of renewal, and a sense of commitment that this is a position with responsibility."

Regional Educational Laboratories have also established or facilitated networks of educators who meet in person or electronically to exchange information, discuss common problems, and learn from each other *(see Breaking the Isolation)*. Networks can also offer follow-up opportunities for participants in professional development.

Teaching Cases

Professionals in law, medicine, and business learn by studying actual cases—could this model be applied to teachers? In 1990, a small group of educators met in San Francisco with WestEd to discuss that possibility. Five years later, the Laboratory has evidence from developmental research and external evaluations that the process can work. Through its Institute for Case Development, it has pioneered the use of brief, vivid, teacher-written cases, based on real classroom dilemmas, to catalyze discussion and reflection in teacher preparation and professional development.

Cases can bridge the gap between what teachers learn at the university and what they really experience on the job as groups of teachers meet regularly to discuss cases in a particular subject. Said one teacher: "It makes me question some of my methods and opens my eyes to look at lessons from the point of view of the student."

Working with a multi-Laboratory task force, the Lab has assembled field-tested cases into thematic casebooks on the topics of math in grades four through eight, mentor teachers, teacher interns, and diversity in the classroom. Casebooks are also being prepared for reading, primary math, high school math, elementary science, and math problem solving.

The Laboratory's math case methods project has worked with more than 4,800 teachers, trainers, and university professors; 1,400 of them have gone on to learn how to write cases themselves and facilitate case discussions on their own. WestEd now sponsors annual case methods conferences in each of the four states in its region.

An evaluation of the case methods project found statistically significant gains in mathematics knowledge and confidence among participating teachers and reported that teachers were changing interactions with students and parents, listening more, and extending the range of instructional activities for lower-achieving students.

A Regional Approach to Professional Growth

As many as 30 percent of new teachers drop out within two years and as many as 60 percent within five years, some studies have found. In an effort to reduce this turnover rate, the Regional Laboratory for Educational Improvement of the Northeast and Islands joined with veteran and new teachers, administrators, college and university professors, professional associations, and state education agency staff to develop a how-to guide for starting and maintaining mentoring programs that pair veteran teachers with new teachers. Published in 1994 after being reviewed and field-tested by practitioners, the research-based guidebook, called *Mentoring: A Resource and Training Guide for Educators*, contains policies, guidelines, and training to help new teachers improve and stay in the profession.

A testament to the value of pooling efforts among states, the guidebook has changed policy and practices throughout the region. The New York City Teacher Centers Consortium uses it citywide to help new and uncertified teachers. Rhode Island has trained special mentoring consultants, who use the guide in their work with districts across the state. Schools, districts, and early childhood centers in other parts of the country are also employing the guide.

After finishing the guidebook, six states in the Northeast asked the Lab to form a Regional Mentoring Network, consisting of educators who meet and communicate regularly and use a train-the-trainers model to spread mentoring programs throughout the region.

This mentoring work is just one outcome of the Northeast Common Market, an ongoing collaborative project of the Laboratory, state education departments, teachers, universities, and others to promote regionwide policies that strengthen educator quality. Another result of this collaboration is the Northeast Regional Certificate (NRC), established in 1989 as the nation's first regional teaching credential. The credential has provided school districts with a larger pool from which to hire teachers and has enabled thousands of educators to cross state lines and take jobs in any of eight Northeastern states and the District of Columbia. More than two-thirds of employers surveyed in an evaluation reported that the credential helped them fill a position for which it would have been difficult to find an appropriately certified candidate. And several reported that the regional credential had allowed them to hire a better qualified candidate. "We're absolutely delighted with the individual that we hired," said one employer. "Without the possibility of legally hiring that person, we would have gone with a candidate that was not as strong."

The Common Market is currently developing rigorous regional credentials for school administrators and a related system for assessing administrator qualifications.

🕮Breaking the Isolation🕮

"It used to be difficult to talk regularly to another teacher across the hall. Now I reach out and touch other teachers all over the United States." That is what SERVE-Line means to Dodie MaGill, a teacher in Stone Mountain, Georgia.

SERVE-Line is an on-line telecommunications network developed by the the Southeastern Regional Vision for Education (SERVE) Laboratory as a tool for educators to share ideas and obtain information. SERVE-line grew out of a Laboratory assessment that identified geographic and economic isolation and limited access to technology as regional challenges.

With a basic computer and a modem, any teacher or administrator in the Southeast can access the network—and also the Internet—through a toll-free telephone number. Subscription fees for schools, district offices, university departments, or individuals are $25 per year. Now in its fourth year, SERVE-Line has some 25,000 users. The Laboratory offers workshops and technical assistance on how to connect to and navigate around the system.

Through SERVE-Line, teachers can obtain public domain software, send and receive electronic mail, obtain information about successful programs and upcoming events, and access the Laboratory's information request service. The electronic "faculty lounge"—where people chat on-line with colleagues—is a very popular feature.

The applications of SERVE-Line are varied and sometimes innovative. In Cleveland, Georgia, a high school science teacher downloads satellite weather images and shares them with colleagues across the South. In Florence, South Carolina, a teacher obtained information for parents on Attention Deficit Disorder. In Belton, South Carolina, SERVE-Line "played an important role in our school getting grants ranging from $500 to $10,000 from both public and private sources," according to educator Julia Ashley.

Laboratories Link School, Home, and Community

Strengthening links among schools, homes, and communities is another priority of the Regional Educational Laboratories. These efforts have various goals, including fostering parent involvement in education, providing early childhood education, engaging community support for school reform, coordinating education and social services, and making economically depressed communities better places to live and learn. Both urban and rural communities are the focus of Laboratory development efforts.

Building on clear findings that parental support is critically important to a child's educational development, several Laboratories are developing models to involve families in education and acquaint parents with research-based strategies to help children learn at home. Some programs also include literacy services for parents *(see Revitalizing the Ohana).*

Schools and preschool programs around the nation are distributing *Family Connections*, a series of weekly guides developed by the Appalachia Educational Laboratory for parents of young children. The colorful, four-page, take-home booklets contain read-aloud selections, brief messages for parents on important education topics, and educational activities that parents and children can do together at home using common materials. The project was spurred by research showing the importance of family involvement in children's early learning.

Two different sets of weekly guides are available, one for preschoolers and one for kindergarten children, at an affordable cost of $150 per set for 30 weeks (a total of $6 per child). Classrooms that order a set receive enough guides to reach 25 families for the whole school year. The booklets have found their way into more than 60,000 homes in 45 states, and the Lab works with the other Regional Laboratories to disseminate the material nationwide.

Family Connections Fun Nights—such as a schoolwide family pajama party to encourage parents to read to children at bedtime—have drawn 90 percent attendance. The Kentucky Department of Education has incorporated *Family Connections* into its statewide program for at-risk preschool children.

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Over the past several years the Pacific Region Educational Laboratory R&D Cadre, the Lab's Regional advisory group, has been studying how to bring home learning styles and school learning styles into greater congruence. Cadre members interviewed teachers and parents and observed children interacting and learning in homes and classrooms. A first grade classroom in Kosrae State, Federated States of Micronesia, is implementing the results of their research. Teachers are placing greater emphasis on active learning experiences for children and developing lessons grounded in students' environment and experiences. Parents are receiving training in ways to contribute to their children's learning. Refining the program and drawing out lessons to guide replication in other sites is underway.

Other collaborative programs are targeting preschool children.

Preschool children in Portland, Oregon, are learning early to make healthy choices as a result of Project Imani, an alcohol and drug abuse prevention curriculum developed and piloted by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory and the local Albina Head Start program. Project Imani, which takes its name from the Swahili word for "faith," grew out of the Laboratory's realization that in economically depressed communities, even preschool children are exposed to difficult pressures and contradictory messages. Through activities appropriate for their age, such as sorting pictures into "healthy" and "unhealthy" categories, participating children practice making good choices in the structured environment of 16 Portland Head Start sites. Teachers who use the Imani curriculum also learn how to communicate with parents about the program's purposes and content. A particularly critical component of Project Imani is its cadre of family team specialists—community people who work with Head Start families on parenting education and other issues in the homes, at family night activities, or at other community gathering places.

Using various strategies from research on collaboration, Laboratories are bringing together schools and communities to achieve a range of purposes. Often the Laboratory is studying the collaborative process—at the same time communities are setting local goals—to learn more about effective strategies for motivating and sustaining school-community partnerships *(see The Whole Community Educates the Child).*

Several Laboratory projects seek to engage the entire community in reinforcing school improvement or reform goals.

A creation of the Regional Laboratory for Educational Improvement of the Northeast and Islands, the Designing Schools for Enhanced Learning Regional Consortium brings together schools as disparate as P.S. 332 in Brooklyn's Brownsville neighborhood and Swanton Elementary in Vermont's far north. Both communities battle depressed economic conditions and low academic achievement. They are also part of a network of 680 schools, individual educators, parents, and policymakers who are deploying strategies to make sure that all their children learn. Through Lab-sponsored large conferences and small working groups, Consortium members acquire and employ new knowledge and skills in such areas as educating diverse populations and keeping children focused on learning. The Laboratory also publishes and broadly distributes the lessons learned by the working groups.

One site visit organized by the Consortium brought Puerto Rican educators to Bridgeport, Connecticut, to observe a monthly community meeting of school leaders, social service agencies, law enforcement, parents, and students. The purpose of the Bridgeport collaborative project was to improve coordination of vital services for young people, thereby freeing schools to concentrate on learning. The Puerto Rican educators had an in-depth chance to see the collaborative process at work and ask questions about how it motivated its members, resolved differences of opinion, and sustained momentum for reform. Impressed with the leadership demonstrated by Bridgeport school representatives, educators from a tiny school in Guyanabo, Puerto Rico, replicated the collaborative process in their community.

Laboratories are also demonstrating how educators can work with community social service and law enforcement agencies to avoid duplication, ensure that students have the basic supports they need to learn, and reduce the social service demands on schools.

Mid-continent Regional Educational Laboratory is helping urban children resist drugs and gangs through a collection of community-based prevention activities called Neighbors Making a Difference, begun in 1990 as a joint effort with the Aurora, Colorado, Public Schools. Students participate in mentorship projects, journal writing, peer support groups, after-school recreation, and job readiness education. The program emphasizes learning through community service: students have tutored preschoolers, "adopted" a senior citizen center, organized a food and clothing bank, and started an inexpensive bicycle repair service.

These actions are "making a difference," as documented by higher grades, more positive attitudes toward school, and fewer absences and disciplinary referrals among participating students. Teachers reported that program training helped them work more effectively with students at risk of serious problems. More than 300 community members have participated in local meetings and briefings, and more than 800 parents have attended school and community events planned by the project.

The school district and its community partners have assumed management of the program, while project staff have identified key insights and lessons for other districts that want to mount similar collaborative projects.

Some projects are tapping the resources and expertise of the community to provide unique student learning experiences and instill in young people the value of community service. Often these projects have the additional goal of revitalizing distressed communities.

In the Mississippi Delta, a region of persistent rural poverty and low educational levels, Southeastern Regional Vision for Education (initially in collaboration with the Appalachia Educational Laboratory and the Mid-continent Regional Educational Laboratory) established the Delta Project, a program to improve education in 58 schools in four states while contributing to community development. Working with local higher education institutions and community groups, 200-plus educators were trained to use situations in the community to teach students academic subjects and thinking skills. In Shelby, Mississippi, for example, students learned employability skills from local business people and participated in after-school mentoring programs. In Kennett, Missouri, students are using the school's computers to collect and write local history.

🕮Revitalizing the "Ohana"🕮

In Waipahu on the island of Oahu, Hawaii—an area hit hard by the closing of a sugar mill and an influx of unemployed immigrants—residents have revived the strength of the ohana (family) by establishing a center where children and adults can participate in a host of activities and services. The Pacific Region Educational Laboratory is a prominent member of this community, along with local organizations, businesses, and social service agencies. The center receives financial, in-kind, and volunteer support from such diverse sources as Hawaiian Electric, Costco Wholesale, and the McInearney Foundation.

At the request of the local community, the Lab developed a family literacy training program for parents, including many for whom English is a second language. A cornerstone of the ohana center's services, the program helps parents learn to communicate better with schools, read aloud to children, and balance a budget. Increased parental involvement in school activities is one payoff. On the center's first anniversary, 1,100 parents and children came to a school activity. School attendance has also improved remarkably. One mother whose sons were often in trouble is now a model parent volunteer for the ohana center, and her children are doing better in school. As the next phase of the project, the Lab is conducting field-based research and development on effective literacy services to the diverse cultural and language groups represented by ohana center parents.

🕮The Whole Community Educates the Child🕮

In five small and large communities in four states, families, schools, businesses, community groups, and social service agencies have joined forces to improve school and neighborhood environments for their children, with help from the Home-School-Community (HSC) Partnership program of the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.

With input from state education departments in the Southwest region, the Lab selected communities that faced challenging educational circumstances and were willing to undertake the responsibilities of a field-based demonstration project. Beginning in 1992 with two communities, the Lab recruited community groups interested in serving as project partners, helped them develop collaborative skills, and served as a neutral facilitator for meetings. Using a four-step process, each partnership developed a unique set of goals and plans.

In West Memphis, Arkansas, the HSC partnership organized a parent-teacher association, secured business support for a health care initiative, and obtained a grant from the Walton Family Foundation for a program to raise student performance. The West Memphis partners have now assumed full responsibility for the project.

In an El Paso, Texas, neighborhood where many families live in "colonias" without water, power, or sewerage, the HSC partnership conceived a way to improve health and education and reduce unemployment: they are "growing their own" bilingual teachers and community health care workers through two locally based training and certification programs. Using two elementary schools as a home base and tapping resources from the University of Texas, the Kellogg Foundation, and other institutions, the network of 65 parents, teachers, administrators, community leaders, and service providers also initiated leadership training programs for students and parents, established a parent resource center, and found donated space for social service satellite offices.

"This is an incredible group of people who felt a need to build resources within their community that would give back to the community," said Lab staff member Norma Saavedra of the El Paso partners.

Laboratories Help Policymakers Reach Informed Decisions

Meeting the research-based information needs of education policymakers is another area that receives emphasis from the Regional Laboratories. Education policymakers include governors and their staffs, state legislators and legislative staffs, chief state school officers, state education department officials, members of state and local boards of education, and several others.

All of the Laboratories have staff with expertise in policy services, and they have taken on an array of issues—state education reform, funding equalization, teacher certification requirements, and early childhood education, to name just a few.

> **Five years ago the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory beefed up its policy-related support by establishing a Regional Policy Information Center, which provides policymakers with the latest information on key topics within the region. Each year the Laboratory reserves a specific portion of its funding for "active state policymaking."**

> **In 1994, the Lab responded to an urgent request from the Iowa state superintendent about the effectiveness of the state's early childhood programs. With short turnaround, the Laboratory collected local data and conducted hundreds of interviews. The results surprised state officials: although strong state programs for early childhood education were in place, more than 30 percent of Iowa's eligible, at-risk preschool children were not being served by any program. These findings helped influence state legislators to target funds on children with the greatest needs and place higher state priority on early childhood education.**

Laboratories provide several forms of assistance to help policymakers reach sound, well-informed decisions *(see Using Dollars Wisely)*. Regional Laboratories arrange workshops, on-line conferences, and other events that enable policymakers to learn about current research and exchange information. Laboratories also organize or facilitate networks of policy makers who face similar challenges or share common goals.

Pulling together or synthesizing research-based information is another important contribution of the Laboratories to the policy process. Laboratories can help policymakers analyze

policy options by noting areas where guidance can be given with confidence and areas where the research evidence is unresolved or has limitations.

Where new knowledge is needed, Laboratories sometimes conduct research, development, and evaluations on legislative and policy issues important to their regions. They also evaluate the effects of new legislation and policies *(see Monitoring State Reform).*

In 1990, the Mid-continent Regional Educational Laboratory helped a state action committee write a plan to improve and modernize South Dakota's education system. The recommendations of this committee, convened by the governor and the state education department, formed the basis of major education reform legislation enacted by the state legislature in 1991. With the support of the action committee, the Lab conducted a three-year evaluation of the effects of the law in 16 school districts and also provided training and technical assistance to participating sites. The study found, among other things, that as a result of the Modernization Program, teachers are playing a more active role in instructional planning and educational decisionmaking and curricula are more closely related to expected student learning outcomes.

Laboratories also study the policymaking process. In situations where policy options are unclear or unstable, for example, some Laboratories have developed standards and processes for making sound decisions.

The objectivity of the Laboratories is an asset in their policy work, and policymakers generally view the Labs as credible sources of unbiased information on complex or controversial issues. Laboratories also serve as neutral conveners, bringing together policymakers with different views and helping them achieve consensus on contentious questions.

In 1988, the Puerto Rico Legislature's Commission on Education Reform asked the Regional Laboratory for Educational Improvement of the Northeast and Islands to help the different factions on the island reach agreement about education reform. A series of policy forums was organized. The first forum assembled teachers, principals, parents, students, and superintendents for a "dream day," where they envisioned how the education system in

Puerto Rico should look and came up with a list of suggestions and plans. At the next forum, Lab staff reported the results of the dream day to a second group composed of legislators, association leaders, industry leaders, university presidents, schools of education faculty, and department of education staff, and challenged them to improve on the first group's work while respecting its integrity. Although the participants in the second forum held ideologies and priorities quite different from the first group, they nevertheless came to consensus on several basic principles.

The vision emerging from the policy forums was embraced in Puerto Rico's reform legislation of 1989, which decentralized the educational structure on the island and established parent-educator councils to help schools move toward a more community-responsive system.

Laboratories also have demonstrated the ability to provide information in a timely fashion, an important criterion for policymakers.

When the Maryland state superintendent asked Research for Better Schools for information about state takeover of schools, the Laboratory went to work right away. It organized conference calls with experts around the country and analyzed the research literature. Within two months a policy analysis was on the superintendent's desk.

Using Dollars Wisely

Equalization of spending among local school districts was an important issue in New Jersey that reached a head with passage of the state's Quality Education Act of 1990 (QEA). This legislation channeled additional state aid to the poorest urban districts. With opponents charging that extra allocations were likely to be spent unwisely or eaten up in bureaucracy, Research for Better Schools helped deflect some of the controversy by contributing advice culled from research.

At the request of then-Governor Florio's office, the Lab and the New Jersey Department of Education developed a menu of proven practices to guide districts' use of QEA funds and published it as a document entitled Demonstrably Effective Improvement Strategies and Programs. Working in partnership with state education officials, Lab staff made recommendations on the document's design, wrote descriptions of effective strategies and programs, collected feedback from a national panel of experts and practitioners, and helped revise the content based on the panel's feedback.

The state education department incorporated the menu into its guidelines for developing, implementing, and evaluating the education improvement plans that the state requires of 30 high-need districts.

A 1994 Lab telephone survey found that urban superintendents are indeed using the document to influence QEA spending decisions and review the quality of their current programs.

Monitoring State Reform

Policymakers everywhere have their eyes on the Bluegrass State as it implements the Kentucky Education Reform Act of 1990 (KERA), a monumental effort to raise standards for all children. And the Appalachia Educational Laboratory is a source of information on KERA's progress and effects in rural communities, as a result of a long-term qualitative study being conducted by the Laboratory.

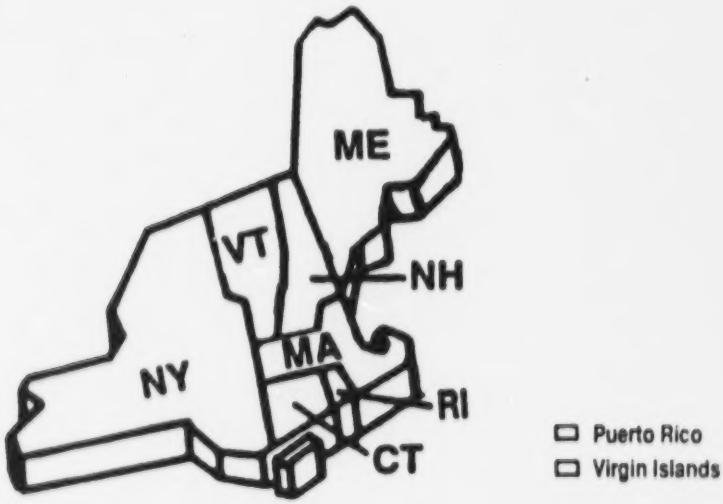
Since school year 1990–1991, Lab researchers have been visiting schools in four rural districts, generally immersing themselves in the school community. Researchers observe classrooms, conduct interviews, and talk to teachers and parents. The study issues periodic reports about how teachers, administrators, and students are responding to KERA. Reports have discussed such findings as an increased emphasis on writing in upper-elementary grades and teachers' continued reliance on traditional materials and techniques.

Study findings are "starting to drive programs," according to Penny Sanders of the state legislature's Office of Education Accountability. State Senator David Karem noted that a Lab report on Family Resource Centers, a controversial component of the KERA package, helped allay fears: "[it] took a lot of heat off the centers, and gave them a lot of credibility."

Appendix:

Listing of Regional Laboratories With Maps

Northeast and Islands Laboratory at Brown (LAB)



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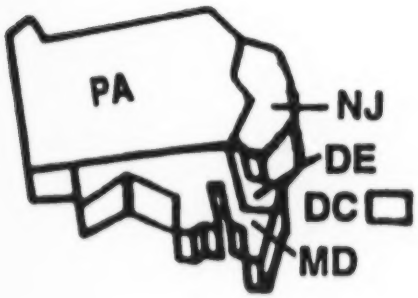
Mid-Atlantic Laboratory for Student Success (LSS)



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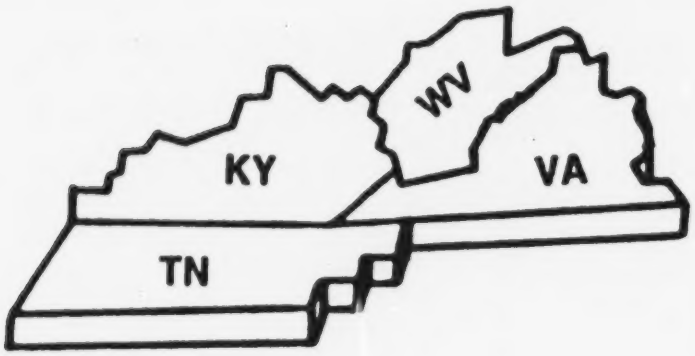

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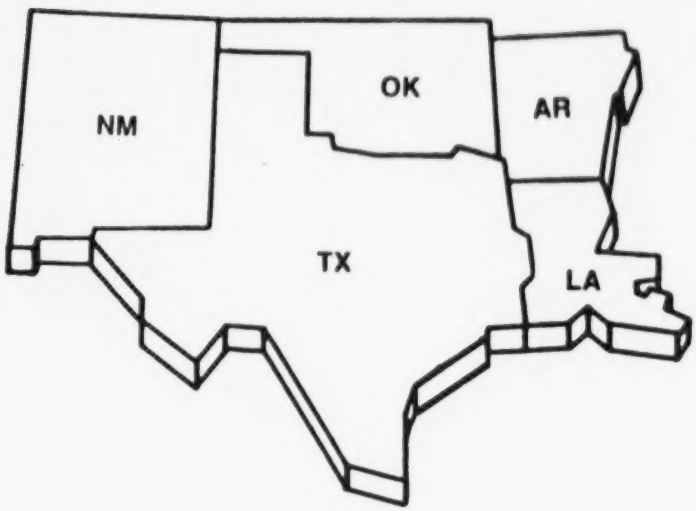
Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL)



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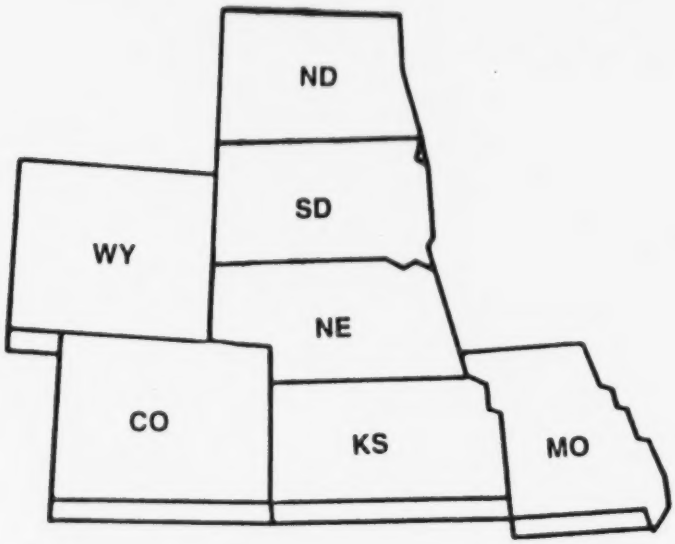
Mid-continent Regional Educational Laboratory (McREL)



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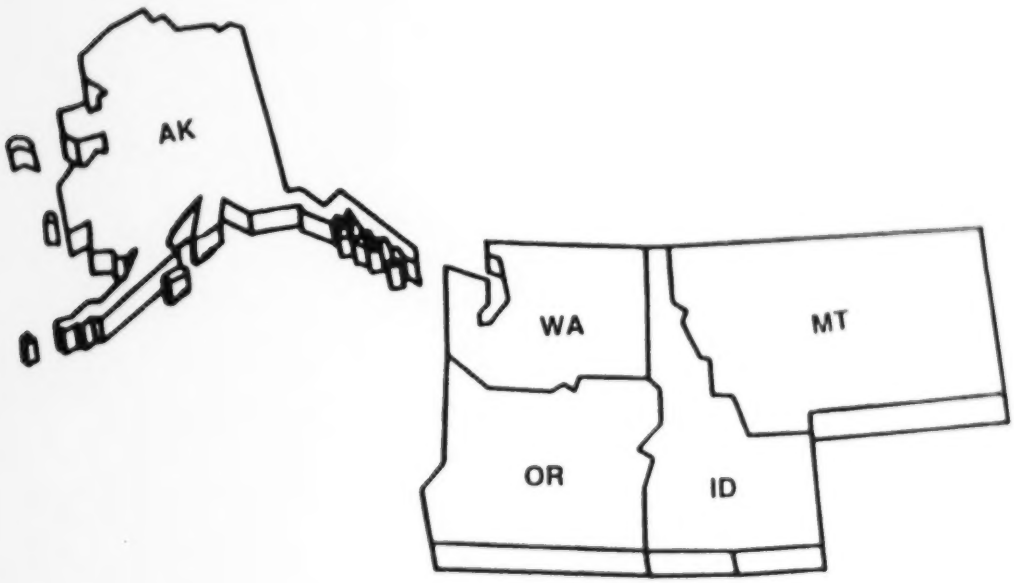
Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL)



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- Commonwealth of Northern Mariana Islands
- Republic of Palau
- Republic of Marshall Islands
- Federated States of Micronesia

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